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(DIS)ENABLERS OF DEMOCRATIZATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the functioning of school governing bodies (SGBs) with a view to understand how SGBs enable or disable democracy in selected secondary schools in the Southern Province of Zambia. The study utilized a qualitative research approach and was underpinned by the conceptual framework of decentralization. The sample comprised members of SGBs (2 chairpersons, 2 head teachers, 2 parent governors, and 2 teacher governors). Data collected from interviews were analyzed thematically, while observations and document review data were analyzed using content analysis. The study established the existence of both enabling and disabling elements in SGBs. The study concluded that the SGBs were, in the main, democratic and had implemented the principle of decentralization with participation by all eligible stakeholders. Despite the presence of democratic features, certain undemocratic elements were identified in the SGBs. The study further revealed that the SGBs' lack of adequate preparation impacted negatively on effective delivery by members, and this was in part attributed to some of the disabling elements found among SGBs. The study, among other things, advocates for the training of school governors if they are to act more democratically.

Keywords: School Governance, School Governing Bodies, Enablers/Disenablers in Democratic School Governance, Democracy, Decentralization, Zambia

1. Introduction

Following Zambia's adoption of multi-party democracy in 1991, the education system was restructured. One notable feature of the restructured education system was the decentralization of the education sector. Decentralization of education in Zambia was implemented by establishing governing bodies, also referred to as education boards, at district, college and secondary school levels (MoE, 2002). This meant that the previous system, which was highly stratified, was abandoned and replaced with a unified entity designed to promote equal opportunities and the participation of various stakeholders in education. Among the measures identified to enhance

stakeholder participation in education was the institutionalization of education boards at the secondary school level.

The institutionalization of these governing boards in Zambia ushered in a new approach to school governance in the education system (MoE, 2003; Bowasi, 2007). According to Bowasi (2007), one notable reform was the democratic governance of secondary schools through the involvement of stakeholders at grassroots level. For this purpose, membership of a school governing board comprised fifteen governors from various stakeholder groups, the majority of which were the parent governors. The school governing boards were seen as vehicles through which communities were enabled to participate in planning and decision-making with regard to the education of their children. In addition, school governing boards were established in order to provide a platform on which communities could participate in such planning and decision-making in the spirit of community service; by so doing, they are enhancing the democratic governance of education (MoE, 2003; Singogo, 2017; Mwase *et al.* 2020).

These functions demonstrate that the principal objective of decentralization in the Zambian education system stems from the need for the citizenry to exercise control of its local affairs. It is not known, however, how school governing bodies enabled/disabled democratic governance of secondary school education in Zambia. To fill this gap, this study was conducted. Using the theories of decentralization and democratic school governance, this study reports the findings of an investigation of how school governing bodies enable/disable democracy in the Southern Province of Zambia. Simply put, the purpose of the study was to investigate how SGBs enable or disable democracy in selected secondary schools in the Southern Province of Zambia.

Democracy embodies the idea that decisions affecting an organization as a whole will be taken by all its members and that all members will each have equal rights to take part in such decisions (Beetham *et al.* 1998). It entails collective decision-making and equality of rights by all stakeholders concerned. By adopting the National Decentralization Policy of 2002, the MoE in Zambia aimed at fostering democratic school governance, thereby introducing a school governance structure that involves all the stakeholder groups of education. The stakeholders also become involved in active and responsible roles in order to promote issues of democracy, tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (MoE, 2002).

Additionally, through the operations of SGBs, the MoE wanted all stakeholders in these governing boards to take part fully in issues of school governance, thereby enhancing democracy (MoE, 2002). Furthermore, decentralized school governance in Zambia aimed at promoting in schools the ideals of representation and stakeholder participation, which were not common during the era of heavy centralization under the previous one-party dictatorship – the UNIP (MoE, 2005a; Nswana and Simuyaba 2021). Thus, the decentralization of the education system meant that the broad masses of the people, regardless of socio-economic standing, would now be able to have a “voice” in the decisions that have a direct or indirect impact on them in school communities. Ideally, SGBs are there to engage society in education. However, anecdotal evidence tends to suggest that this does not seem to be wholly reflected in the case of Zambia (Carmody, 2004; Makwaya, 2005; Bowasi, 2007). If the MoE’s rationale for introducing SGBs is, among other things, to promote the democratization of education, then it is worth investigating the actual functioning of SGBs, particularly as they enable or disable democracy at Zambian secondary schools.

The paper is organized as follows: the first section provided an introduction and background as well as the statement of the problem to the study. Section 2 presented the conceptual framework and reviewed literature on democratic practices in school governance while Section 3 detailed the methodology utilized to achieve the research purpose. In Section 4, the findings of the study were presented while Section 5 dealt with the discussion of the research findings. Finally, Section 6 concludes and proposes some recommendations for policy action.

2. Conceptual framework

Decentralization serves as the conceptual framework of this study. Multiple reasons are cited in the literature as the basis for decentralization in Third World countries including Zambia.

As used in this study, the conceptual framework is specifically used to understand school governance particularly in the context of Zambia and in relation to the background of the study.

School governance in Zambia today can, just as in any other postcolonial state, only be understood and explained against the backdrop of the policies of the colonial period. The racial segregation of black people, such as the “pyramidal” structure, which allowed few blacks to proceed up the formal education ladder constituted the mainstay of the colonial regime policies (MoE, 1977).

Against this background, in 1964, the newly independent Zambia embarked on the task of dismantling this racist system of education and developed a system that would provide equal opportunities for all regardless of race, tribe, or religious affiliation (Carmody, 2004; MoE, 2003). This led to various reforms, which had the express purpose of eliminating the inequalities that prevailed during the colonial era (Carmody, 2004). The education policy at that time was guided by three main objectives: equality of education opportunities for all, promoting national unity, and serving the needs of national development (MoE, 2005a).

As a result of these objectives and guided by policy principles, policy issues were concentrated on how the education system could be reorganized, focusing on access to primary, secondary and higher education, the nature of the curriculum, retention of pupils in school, the financing of education, teacher supply, and the ownership and management of schools. In order to realize the above intentions, the Zambian government decided to take center stage in the management of the education system. This brought about a highly centralized education management system (Mwanakatwe, 2019).

As the challenge to increase access and provide quality education continued to grow, the government embarked on the first-ever major education policy reforms in 1977. These reforms emphasized the need to integrate study and work, stressing equal balance between education and production. The reforms could not be implemented, however, due to a number of factors; prominent among them were economic constraints such as the fiscal crisis that hit the country following a sharp decrease in the price of copper in the 1970s (Kelly, 1991)

Similarly, it should be noted that the government, led by the United National Independence Party (UNIP), had at the time adopted a socialist mode of education, which was highly centralized. This model was apparently informed by the thinking that since the main focus was redressing the previous imbalances nationwide, the central government was best placed and resourced to drive this daunting task (Lungwangwa, 1995). The reforms cost the central government a lot in terms of salaries and allowances, transport, services, pupil grants, furniture and equipment, student loans, examination expenses and the like.

By 1991, when the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) came into power, the heavy government expenditure on education was no longer sustainable or defensible. In the first place, rapid education expansion gave rise to concerns over economic and education efficiency (Kelly, 1991). Critics of the education system noted a steep and evident decline in pass rates and the quality of education with correspondingly high unemployment rates for school graduates (Kelly, 1991). Secondly, the highly centralized top-down system of governance made it difficult, if not impossible, for stakeholders at various levels of the education system to participate in decision-making, thereby alienating them from the entire process and pointing to the need for a change in the organizational culture (Singogo, 2017; Mwase *et al.* 2020).

These realities presented a “wake-up” call for a paradigm shift from centralized education governance to a governance system situated at the grassroots. This paradigm shift reform was informed by the belief that resources would be better used and the task of creating good quality and more equal education would be more effectively addressed if the means and methods were chosen at the local level by stakeholders rather than the central government (MoE, 2005a; Mubanga, 2008). The decision to decentralize was also intended to allow for more rapid reaction and action regarding problems and opportunities that occur at the point of delivery, thereby empowering lower levels with decision-making responsibilities (MoE, 2005b; Kandondo and Muleya, 2013; Nswana and Simuyaba, 2021). Decentralization was also aimed at promoting community participation in all matters relating to education (MoE, 2005b).

In 1992, the MMD government ushered in an interim National Education Policy called Focus on Learning, which emphasized the issues of resource mobilization to support education

provision (MoE, 2005b). Later on, the second major National Education Policy, *Educating Our Future*, was launched in 1996 (MoE, 1996). This policy basically addressed issues of education delivery in a liberalized economic environment and a democratized political governance system. 'Educating Our Future' was based on the democratic principles of liberalization, decentralization, cost sharing, efficiency, equity and quality education (MoE, 2005b; Lungwangwa, 1995; Bowasi, 2007). Among these, decentralization as a policy reform in Zambia can be singled out for the purpose of this study.

In keeping with the democratic and liberal philosophy the country had embraced, Zambia decided to decentralize the education delivery system. This was implemented through governing bodies, also referred to as "education boards", at district, college and secondary school levels. The establishment of these governing bodies ushered in a new approach to school governance in the Zambian education system (MoE, 1996; Bowasi, 2007). One notable reform according to Bowasi (2007) was the democratic governance of secondary schools through the involvement of stakeholders. For this purpose, membership of school governing bodies (SGBs) comprised the head teacher (who is the chief executive officer of a secondary SGB), two teacher representatives, two learner representatives, one local councilor, one resident of a particular district (district representative), three members of the community chosen by parents during the parent-teacher association meeting (the parent governors), two teacher union representatives, the PTA chairperson, one church representative (nominated by the PTA) and one representative from the office of the District Education Board Secretary (MoE, 2005a). In this arrangement, parents were supposed to be the majority in the SGBs and the chairperson of the SGB should come from the parent component.

The fifteen-member composition discussed in the previous paragraph sought to democratize school governance, as stipulated in the 1996 Ministry of Education (MoE) policy document, 'Educating our Future', which was based on fulfilling the democratic principles of liberalization, decentralization, cost sharing, efficiency, capacity building, access, equity and quality education. Further to this, SGBs in Zambia were seen as the main vehicle through which communities were enabled to participate in educational planning and decision-making (MoE, 2005b). Apart from enabling communities to participate in educational matters, the SGBs were also intended to allow for a more rapid reaction to and actions on the problems and opportunities that occur at the points of delivery, thereby improving the learning environment and consequently the quality of education provided (Banda, 2009). In addition, the MoE document adds that SGBs were established to provide a platform on which communities could participate in planning and decision-making for the education of their children, in the spirit of community service, and by so doing, they were enhancing the democratic governance of education (MoE, 2005b).

The above functions clearly demonstrate that the principal objective of decentralization in Zambian education stems from the need for the citizenry to exercise control of its local affairs. This requires some degree of authority given to the provincial, district and school level contrary to absolute control by the center (MoE, 2005a; Nswana and Simuyaba, 2021), particularly when compared to the centralization policies that were present at the time. The decentralization of decision-making power to the school level has become an internationally acclaimed reform (McGinn and Welsh, 1999; Chikoko, 2008) that is claimed to be consistent with the notion of "good" governance (Mncube 2008, 2009; Bowasi 2007; Banda, 2009). According to Mncube (2009), the decentralization of decision-making power to the school level was a means to several ends: the socioeconomic transition to democracy and good governance, improved service delivery by shifting decision-making closer to the grassroots for improved accountability and responsiveness, and the empowerment of citizens and participation in governance.

Many educationists believe that transferring governance and management authority from a centralized state agency to schools would rejuvenate schools by giving parents, pupils and the local community a greater role in setting school missions (Quan-Baffour, 2006; Chikoko, 2008; Mncube (2009), an eminent writer on the democratization of education in South Africa through SGBs, emphasized the need for stakeholders at secondary school level to engage fruitfully in deliberations dealing with school governance, as this would in turn lead to democracy where every "voice" would be heard. However, it is worth noting that limited scholarly information is available

in Zambia regarding the operations of secondary school governing bodies, let alone their contribution to the democratization of secondary school education.

Various scholars have made reference to democratic practices in school governance. Ball (2013) argued that schools had a responsibility to develop the capability of parents, teachers and other local stakeholders to participate, discuss, challenge and critique. He further indicated that it was time to get down to basics; to think seriously about what education was, its purpose and what it meant to be educated and who should decide these things.

Related to the above was a study carried out in America on the history of democratic education in American public schools (Loflin (2008). This study looked at schools in a democracy and democracy in schools. The study analyzed the Democratic Education Consortium, formed in 2004 in Indianapolis, an independent group of adults and youths dedicated to promoting democratic practices in public education. This was done through a forum for public voices on education, which sought to encourage future civic engagement by encouraging shared governance in schools and classrooms that empowered teachers.

Furthermore, research evidence from the United States seem to demonstrate that a democratic school environment nurtured democratic values, dispositions, skills and behaviors. Though carried out in a different context, these studies indicate that democratic education is not only possible but that it is feasible, even within the bureaucratic structure of American schools and against the shifting attitudes of society. Moreover, these studies add to the evidence that in other countries, democratic experiences in school and in the classroom do contribute to the participatory awareness, skills and attitudes fundamental to life in democratic societies; an aspect our study hopes to investigate with special reference to Zambian SGBs.

Banks *et al.* (2005) mention that the Center for Multicultural Education was convened at the University of Washington with support from the Spencer Foundation as a diversity citizenship and global education consensus panel. The goal of this panel was to publish a set of principles, guidelines and concepts that school practitioners could use to build or renew citizenship education programs. These programs would balance diversity and unity, while also preparing to become more effective citizens in the global context. Therefore, the developed principles and concepts were to be reflected in schools (Banks *et al.* 2005). The publication was further meant to be used by educators to promote democratic and multicultural practices in schools and the various states of the world (Banks *et al.* 2005). Learners were to be taught knowledge about democracy and democratic institutions and were provided with opportunities to practice democracy. This meant that learners were to participate in democracy in schools, which implies producing a learner that would participate regularly in decision-making about the problems and controversies of school life in school governance and policymaking.

Other scholars (like Bush and Gamage 2001; Moonga, 2016) reported that educators in Denmark, Australia and England had done much to revitalize learner councils and classroom meetings by involving all the learners. For example, in England, it was established that elementary and secondary school learners were involved in regular meetings in which they deliberated and resolved their concerns and grievances and advised their representatives of the school councils. Opportunities were provided for frequent meetings between learners and their representatives to discuss matters that affected their school life. In this way, administrators, teachers, pupils and the community at large learnt to coexist.

Angel (1998) in Britain compared two secondary schools, showed that the one which was traditional and authoritative instilled fewer civic attitudes among learners, while the democratic one scored higher on the democratic values and attitudes of its learners. After comparing the two schools, it was revealed that the democratic school encouraged pupils to express themselves freely and promoted equality in comparison to the traditional school.

Myers (2008) investigated teachers' experiences with democratic school reform in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The findings of this study suggest that the idea of collective decision-making in schools is a popular democratic educational reform model. The study further established that participation in school decision-making empowered teachers and improved teaching. The results showed that in Brazil, the election of principles by teachers, parents and staff reshaped school–authority relations, resulting in greater freedom for teachers to introduce democratic teaching methods, while articulating the school as a democratic institution.

Additionally, Moonga (2016) indicated that collective decision-making in schools, in which teachers and the community members collaborated with administrators to set up school policies and to determine the curriculum, had been a popular democratic reform model in North America since the 1980s. This participation in school decision-making empowered and professionalized teachers which in turn promoted democracy in schools. This type of participation recognized teachers as key actors in the process of educational change, as they were given more freedom thereby changing the power relationships in schools among stakeholders (Moonga, 2016).

Leung *et al.* (2014) conducted a survey on school governance and citizenship development in Hong Kong and explored the level and scope of pupil participation in school governance, and the facilitating and hindering factors influencing learner participation. The findings of the research revealed that the civic mission of schools in nurturing critical thinking and participatory citizens had always been downplayed in Hong Kong schools. The idea of civic awareness had never been ranked high on the agenda. The study concluded that school governance does not facilitate the nurturing of active participation by citizens; hence, it suggested the urgent need for democratic development in Hong Kong (Leung *et al.* 2014).

In line with the theoretical perspective of delivery, educators have argued that the school, as a microcosm of society, should have some of the characteristics of a democratic community. Some scholars further argue that democracy is learnt by practicing it in all areas of life (Mncube and Harber, 2010; Moonga, 2016). In a related study, Harber (1995) argued that there was increasing evidence from studies of school effectiveness that democratically organized schools were more successful in terms of conventional indicators of effectiveness than traditional schools. However, democratic practices are viewed differently in different circles. What, therefore, might a democratic school look like? Haber (1995) emphasizes that democracy is not just about participation but, more importantly, about how participation takes place in schools. In advancing this argument, Harber (1995) notes, for example, that participation rates were high in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union but this did not make them democracies. This, therefore, implies that there are important procedural values underlying democracy, which education must foster and encourage, including tolerance of diversity and mutual respect between individuals and groups, evidence of respect in forming opinions, a willingness to be open to the possibility of changing one's mind in the light of such evidence and regarding all people as having equal social and political rights as human beings (Harber, 1995; Moonga, 2016).

Moonga (2016) argued that if schools were to be democratic, they must be organized in such a way as to develop democratic skills and values through experience. Participation in school governance must be meaningful and not merely on paper. Every participant must make a positive contribution to the governance of schools; therefore, the participation of all stakeholders strengthened the leadership role of school administration and increased teamwork among all the interested parties in schools.

In spite of all the difficulties and issues prevailing in SGBs, the researchers are of the opinion that participation of all stakeholders in SGBs was an important ingredient in building democracy in the school system, as well as in the wider society. For this reason, the researchers tends to agree with Mncube and Harber (2010), who argue that despite the evident difficulties in SGBs, these bodies are the best forums for bringing stakeholders together for the benefit of the school and its community. Their argument suggests that SGBs provide the best arena in which the practice of democracy can prevail in schools. To sum up, Carmody (2004) indicated that the prevalence of democracy in schools was depicted in representation and debates that were theoretically and practically open and fair. In addition, and in contrast, as observed by Carmody (2004, p. 61), "relations between teachers remain hierarchical ... as yet, it is not clear that anything approaching a liberating critical education had appeared at any level of the education system in Zambia". Whether or not the SGBs in Zambia enable or disable the democratization of education at secondary school level, as enshrined in the national policy document, MoE (1996) remains a conjecture. It Zambia were is, therefore, the purpose of this study to ascertain whether or not the decentralized school governing boards in serving the purpose for which they were created: addressing issues of democracy in schools.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in two districts of the Southern Province of Zambia using qualitative research approach while operating in an exploratory case study research design. Through a combination of research instruments, the case study design yielded a complete understanding of the actual functioning of the school governing boards. From the two district, two schools made up the sample. One school was selected from each district. The targeted population included all school governing board members in the selected districts and the study sample comprised 8 participants (i.e., 2 chairpersons of school governing boards, 2 head teachers, 2 parent governors, and 2 teacher governors). In the nutshell, purposive sampling was adopted. The characteristic features of this kind of sampling is that it allowed the researchers to hand pick the sample, based on their knowledge of the area or phenomenon being studied. According to Brink (1996), this sampling uses the judgement of the researcher to select those subjects who, in the researchers' view, know the most about the phenomenon and who are able to articulate and explain the nuances to the researchers. Since purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insights from the participants, the researchers selected a sample from which most knowledge could be learnt about this case study.

This selection criterion is based on Cohen *et al.* (2000, p. 103) who claim "purposive sampling means the researcher hand picks the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of his/her judgement of their typicality". We therefore believe that the selected sample gives a good representation of participants in this case study design.

All data were collected using interview schedules, observation checklists and document reviews. Strategies used to conduct this research included interviewing adult participants and reporting findings, observing participants and reviewing official documents in research sites. This was done in order to investigate school governing bodies' experiences in relation to school governance. Data were analyzed thematically to generate themes and sub-themes while the data from reviewed documents were analyzed using content analysis. Permission and informed consent were sought prior to data collection. Ethical issues were adhered to from the point of data collection to the report writing stage, and the names of participants and their schools were kept strictly confidential.

4. Findings

In an attempt to understand how school governing bodies, enable/disable democracy in Zambian secondary schools discussions were held with the school governors particularly, the chairpersons of school governing boards, the head teachers, the parent governors and the teacher governors. These provided helpful feedback on how this concept was understood by the various participants. The responses were coded in order to generate themes, with two themes emerging: "enablers" of democratic school governance and "disenablers" of democratic school governance. The general perception based on the responses from these stakeholders were that SGBs enabled democracy in a secondary school set-up through stakeholder participation, collective decision-making, freedom of expression, gender representation, and through accountability and transparency.

The enabling of democracy in secondary schools by SGBs was achieved through various scheduled and ad-hoc meetings. During fieldwork, the study participants were asked if the school governing bodies enabled democracy in their respective secondary schools. The majority of school governors affirmed that their school governing boards indeed enabled democracy by ensuring that all board members participated in scheduled board meetings. At both schools, a "notice of meeting" memo" was issued two weeks before the meeting was held. Further, according to the *2005 National Guidelines for the Implementation of Education Boards* in Zambia, a governing board of a school is supposed to have at least one meeting per term, information of which was given to all the board members. As way of illustrating the criticality of enabling democracy through meeting participation, the head teacher from one of the schools explained that it was a tradition of their school to ensure that the school governors were prepared well in advance so that they plan for the prescribed meetings and according to him that information was

given to the school governors at each end of year meeting and whenever their school was ready to host the board meeting, they would send to the “Honorable” a “notice of meeting” two weeks before the set date. This is one way in which our governing board promote democracy (head teacher from School A).

Other than gazetted meetings, school governing boards occasionally held unplanned meetings aimed at addressing emergence issues. To demonstrate how important these meetings were in promoting democracy, the board chairperson for one of the schools had this to say:

Whether it is a prescribed meeting or an emergence meeting, no one is left out. We work hard to ensure that all members attend the meeting. At times, we use the services of the school driver to locate the members and issue them with invitation memos. By so doing, I feel our school governing board has succeeded in enabling democracy at a secondary school level (Board chairperson, School B).

As a follow up to the above statement, the Chairperson confirmed that the management team had on rare occasions made decisions without consulting the rest of the members of the school governing board. However, in situations like that, the chairperson did indicate that he was usually updated.

Merely having meetings was not a sure way of ensuring that SGBs enabled or disabled democracy in the governance of Secondary Schools in Zambia, but how these meetings were conducted is of ultimate importance. One such imperative aspect is that of participation. It was observed during two sessions arranged to observe the meetings of school governing board members for the two sampled schools that various participants representing various constituencies did participate on the school governing boards. This observation confirmed the findings from interviews that various participants were indeed allowed to participate on the governing board while representing various constituents and, as stated in the *2005 guidelines for the implementation of school governing boards*. Further, review of the minutes of some school governing board meetings and analyzing the attendance list confirmed that several individuals representing various interests had indeed participated in these board meetings proving individual participation as an enabler in democratic school governance.

Notwithstanding the importance of scheduled and unscheduled SGBs meetings as enablers of democratic school governance, stakeholder representation in these school governing boards has played a pivotal role as a factor that enables democracy. By law, governing boards in Zambia are comprised of the 15-member composition drawn from the various categories of the constituents of school governors namely school management, teachers, parents and pupils. The voices of each of governors represent their constituencies, that is, teacher governors will speak for teachers in the SGBs while parent governors will speak for parents. When stressing the importance of stakeholder participation as an enabling factor in democratic school governance, one of the head teachers for the schools under study indicated that there was no category of participants left out in the operations of the school governing boards as the chairperson of the board, the parent representatives, the teacher representatives as well as union representatives were invited to participate. They are all seen as an integral part of the school governing board (Interview from Head teacher for School B).

Further, as argued by the other head teacher from the schools under study, SGBs promote democracy in that they promote participation of a wide range of stakeholders such as parents, teachers, learners, government officials and union leaders in school activities. This composition is itself a democracy. Not only do these governors represent stakeholder's interests but do freely participate and always have something to say on behalf of the constituency they represent as argued by one of the parents:

In the current arrangement, all members of the grassroots participate and say something on school matters, parents also say something on what could be done in the school, teachers are among the participants and of course not forgetting the learners. What I can say is that there is a wide array of stakeholder participation (Parent governor and PTA chair, School A).

The “current arrangement” which is being referred to above is the phase that followed the implementation of education boards through the National Decentralization Act of 2002. It is clear

from the findings gleaned from the interview data that stakeholder participation was one of the enablers of democratic school governance. The SGBs understood stakeholders' participation as a democratic arrangement which was all-embracing in school governance, and included a wide range of stakeholders; namely, parents, educators and learners, as prescribed in the document, *Guidelines for Implementation of Education Boards in Zambia* (MoE, 2005a).

Apart for stakeholders' participation, collective decision-making emerged as another critical factor enabling democracy among the participants from the sampled schools. As argued by the PTA chairperson from one of the schools under study, most decisions in the governance of the schools were made collectively and whatever decisions were made in this manner were respected by everyone in the SGBs. Collective decision-making was therefore viewed as an enabler of democratic school governance. Similarly, these views were echoed by parent governors from the other School under study (Parent governor, School B). Not only were these decisions made collectively, but were arrived at after a lot of debate hence promoting a democratic dispensation in the SGBs (Teacher governor, School B).

Clearly, collective decision-making in school board meetings is a testimony of an enabler in the democratization of school governing bodies. This is also confirmed by resolutions made through meetings, which were mainly through consensus as perused by the researchers. Freedom of expression has also been identified as an enabler in the democratic dispensation of SGBs. Notably, going by the data obtained from the interviews; freedom of expression was viewed by participants as critical in enabling democracy among the sampled schools. In support of freedom of expression, a parent governor, from School A explained as follows:

We are free to speak especially when the results of our children are bad. This makes us ask the management team to explain the causes of poor results. We are there in the school governing boards to represent other parents on issues concerning poor performance of our children. Other issues may not be of concern to us (Parent governor School A).

According to the above quote, the parent governor and indeed the other governors were free to express themselves during school governing board meetings on pupils' performance, sensitive as it may be being freely discussed. This was substantiated by a parent governor from the other school who indicated that their governing board was free to deliberate on issues that affect their children i.e., learners and that everyone is free to talk and the chairperson encouraged all of them to freely express themselves in meetings (Parent governor, School B). Evidently, freedom of expression practiced in these SGBs was a key factor in enabling democratic school governance.

World over, gender has become topical issue. Generally, male dominance in decision-making in society and in various institutions has been criticized in the endeavor to promote gender balance. It is therefore imperative to be gender sensitive in school governance. In this regard, it is expected that school governing boards will enable democracy by ensuring a balance of male and female members. During the study, the sampled schools alluded to the fact that their school governing boards had a representation of both genders. This was highlighted by the board Chairperson for School B:

Our governing bodies enable democracy partly by ensuring that the aspect of gender was considered during appointment of the governors. We may not have a 50:50 representation but consideration is given to make sure that a good representation comes from the female folk. (Chairperson, School B).

A teacher governor from School B had this to say about enabling factors in school governance:

My expectation in a democracy is to see representation of both genders on a school governing board. I am glad that I am sitting on this board as a female member representing my female folks. I take this as a democratic practice. (Teacher governor, School B)

Further, a parent governor had the following to say on the subject:

In my opinion, democracy entails that both male and female members are represented on a school governing board. The practical reality is that our board has both genders represented. I feel this is democracy; what do you think? (Parent governor, School A).

From the findings above, it is evident that school governing board members view gender as an enabling factor in democratic school governance. Further, the above verbatim appear to suggest that a 50:50 representation was not what was meant by a good representation of both genders. Representation by both genders was good enough for democracy in the view of participants. The researchers; however, noted that both male and female genders were represented in the school governing meetings but not on a 50-50 basis, as there were more males than females in the two sampled schools. This did not seem to worry the participants, as they were fine with this arrangement as long as both genders were represented.

Another factor enabling democracy in SGBs was accountability and transparency as this emerged from the study. The participants viewed the concepts of accountability and transparency in financial and other issues as paramount in enabling democracy in the operations of secondary school SGBs. This was demonstrated in part by the two PTA chairperson participants, representing the two school governing boards, who hailed the democratic aspect of transparency through the operations of the SGBs.

As argued by PTA chairpersons of the two schools under study, the SGBs enable democratic practices through transparency in financial and other issues. For example, when dealing with issues of finance, the financial committee of the governing board prepares the budget and then it is discussed in a transparent manner through the involvement of all governing board members. Further, all resources were utilized for the benefit of the children and that budgets were scrutinized by all governors to ensure that a large percentage of the school resources were used for the benefit of the children. In this case, the school governing board has upheld the democratic value of transparent (PTA Chairperson).

With regard to finances and school projects, all parent governors agreed that they were involved in offering transparency and accountability on financial matters. They held the view that this occurred through the active participation of some of the parents on the finance committee of the school governing board and being involved in fundraising activities of the schools.

To supplement the data gleaned from the interviews, during participants' observation sessions the researchers noted that budgets were presented by a school accountant in both sampled schools. The school accountant in each case was a member of the financial and accounts committee of the school governing body. A review of the 2016 and 2017 minutes from both schools further confirmed accountability and transparency in regard to certain issues, as the minutes highlighted presentations made by the chairperson on finance and budgets in school governing board meetings. After presenting the financial report and budgets, there was a section in the minutes, which highlighted reactions to the budget presentation by members of the school governing boards, who engaged the presenter on issues that emerged from the presentation. The first author on behalf of the researchers was further privileged to see the nature of this debate during the observation sessions. Both educator governors and parent governors were able to engage the presenter on issues that were not clear.

It is clear from the above discussion that there were enabling factors in democratic school governance in both sampled schools. Almost all the school governing board members identified the following as enabling factors in democratic school governance: participation in meetings, stakeholder participation on the school governing boards, collective decision-making, freedom of expression, gender representation and accountability and transparency. The data indicate that the practices of school governing boards took place in an enabling environment in which educators and parents were free to participate or deliberate on issues that affect the education of their children.

Despite the various factors that enabled democratic School Governance some factors perceived to be disenablers of democratic practices among school governing bodies in the Southern Province of Zambia were identified. Among the disenablers identified was the undemocratic manner election were held to vote for the School Governing Board Chairperson.

Members, particularly parental governors seemed not to understand the criteria under which the Chairpersons were elected as these had been there for long periods of time without any elections being held. To them it seemed the school administrators were the only ones with an upper hand in the election of chairperson. Apart from being in office without clear criteria of how they found themselves there, the chairperson also seemed to have stayed in office far beyond the normal terms of offices. This generally was not in conformity with the democratic dispensation of school governance (Parent governor, School B).

The documents reviewed also confirmed the presence of the same chairperson for long periods of time, for example, the minutes of a board meeting held in 2008 for School B showed that the same chairperson who chaired the meeting on this date was still holding the same position in 2018. A similar picture was obtained in School A. Interviews with head teachers from both School A and School B confirmed that they had not changed their chairpersons since the boards came into existence in 2005, thereby confirming an undemocratic element of the boards.

The findings of the study revealed other disempowering factors. For example, although there were learner governors in the SGBs, their participation on a school governing board was met with mixed feelings and hence were excluded when issues adult governors felt sensitive were being discussed. They were thus denied a chance to participate fully in school governance neither were they active in decision-making processes which was dominated by adults.

The other factor affecting democratic school governance was state/government interference. In investigating the undemocratic elements found in the school governing boards, the study revealed that government interference in school activities was another disempowering factor. A good example of the undemocratic element by the government is that of determining school fees. More often than usual, the SGBs would determine school fees but the government overturn this decision and make their own. There is a lot more government interferences, which sometimes water down school based policies (Chairperson, School A).

Emphasizing the aspect of government interference in policy development by the SGBs, the chairperson of the school governing board expressed his frustration as follows:

Though we are responsible for developing school-based policies, we are somewhat limited in that when it comes to admission policies, we are not fully responsible for this. Admission of learners is done at district level. Teachers or head teacher representatives go. But we parents do not have any say on this. We are just on the receiving end. (Chairperson, School B).

The same sentiments were expressed by the chairperson for School A. It was also noted by the head teachers that the reviewed admission policy had elements of government interference in that the central government still held certain strings with regard to the school. The head teacher participants revealed that the governing boards experienced disempowering factors in the implementation of democratic values. For example, the Central government still held the strings at school level. It was further established that the Central government still provided some criteria for lower levels to follow, as evidenced in the current budgeting process where thresholds were provided, and lower levels acted on what was already tailored. The MoE also still had control of the operations of the schools. The Data obtained from the interviews revealed this as one of the disempowering factors in democratic school governance.

5. Discussion

The findings, which emerged from the first theme of the research, were that SGBs enabled democracy. From this major theme, several sub-themes were generated which enabled participants to justify their claims regarding the factors that enabled democratic school governance. Almost all the school governing board members identified the following as enabling factors in democratic school governance: participation in meetings, stakeholder participation on the school governing boards, collective decision-making, freedom of expression, gender representation and accountability and transparency.

The data indicate that the practices of school governing boards took place in an enabling environment in which educators were free to participate or deliberate on issues that affect the

education of their children (MoE, 1996). In this enabling environment, the Zambian education policy document (MoE, 1996) gives all education stakeholders (head teachers, parents, teachers and learners) some level of authority to make decisions within the school environment. This practice is in line with the decentralization policy of 2002 implemented by Zambia, a reform which Bowasi (2007) identifies as a means to democratize the governance of secondary schools and colleges of education by involving stakeholders at grassroots level. Other writers (e.g. Mwase *et al.* 2020) regard this as a paradigm-shift reform which was informed by the belief that resources would be better used and the task of creating good quality and more equal education would effectively be addressed if the means and methods were chosen at the local level by stakeholders, rather than the central government. This argument is in line with the concept of decentralization and school governance, which advocate for the fair and equal participation by all in decision-making.

Other democratic principles identified by participants in the sampled schools were freedom of expression and a sense of justice and fairness. These democratic principles were noted during direct observation of the operations of the SGBs during fieldwork. It was observed that the governing boards promoted freedom of expression in that all members were encouraged to participate freely in school governing board meetings and this in turn allowed the nurturing of qualities such as participation, innovation, cooperation, autonomy and initiative in parents, and staff. This sits well with what Starkey (1991); Sayed (2002) and Carmody (2004) highlight as ideals necessary in any democratic dispensation.

The findings also revealed that school governing boards upheld the principle of equality in decision-making processes for all members of the governing board. This was noted in the way they deliberated in meetings on all pertinent issues affecting school governance. This is in line with Young (2000), who argues that when all members of an organization are included equally in the decision-making process, the decisions will be considered by all as legitimate. By accommodating the views of all stakeholders, the chairperson of the school governing boards promoted what Young (2000) termed inclusivity or inclusion. Once all members are included in a decision-making process, a sense of democracy is upheld (Mwase *et al.* 2020).

The second major theme, which emerged from the research, was that SGBs disenabled democratic school governance. From this major theme, several sub-themes were generated which allowed participants to justify their claims regarding the practices that militated against democratic school governance; for example, the participants indicated that school governing boards were undemocratic in relation to the selection process for candidates running for the position of chairperson. However, the participants' narratives made no mention of the election itself, who voted or the degree to which members were involved in the selection or election of the chairperson.

In an ideal democratic practice, the nature of school-based participation relates to the specific functions and decision-making processes that are assumed by parents, teachers, and the SMT (Kapembwa *et al.* 2020). The duties and functions of the school governing board members are explained in the National Decentralization Policy Document (MoE, 2003) and the Principles of Education Boards, Governance and Management Manual (MoE, 2005b). These are the reference points for issues that concern school governing board regulations. This study established that many democratic practices existed in the schools under study, with the research findings revealing that the election and renewal of the chairperson position had become the prerogative of the SMT, an issue, which did not motivate other parent governor who had leadership aspirations.

These sentiments express a negative attitude to the undemocratic practice exercised by the SMT. This is contrary to the notion of democracy that Sayed (2002, p. 10) talks about when he states that democracy is "about common decision-making and action, about doing things in common". This practice by the SMT lacks this concept of democracy; hence the opposite of democracy prevailed. In this case, the researchers concluded that the process of democracy operated within a conflict domain where mutual decision-making was compromised. Accordingly, consensus came into play by forcing other governors to endorse the decisions the management team had arrived at. In Sayed's (2002 p. 10) words, "consensus in decision-making and action somehow binds but in this case consensus was not upheld." There was no general agreement

among members of the school governing board on how board chairpersons should be selected or for how long they were required to be in office. As such, this had become a breeding ground for conflict in both School A and School B. The conflict-solving rule is, therefore, to uphold consensus in as far as the election of chairpersons to school governing boards is concerned. It is apparent that consensus as a democratic principle is not only an integral part of democratic school governance, but also that the education system or the school governing board cannot function meaningfully without it.

The MoE *Guidelines for the Implementation of School Governing Boards in Zambia* (MoE, 2005a, p. 19) state that governing boards were, among other things, intended to “enable stakeholders to participate in educational planning and decision-making”. Furthermore, earlier studies in other contexts have emphasized the need for stakeholders at secondary school level to engage fruitfully in deliberations dealing with school governance (Mncube, 2008; Mncube, 2009; Dibete and Potokri, 2018). The exclusion of learners from some school governance activities, therefore, does not resonate well with the original idea regarding the purpose of school governing boards in Zambia, and runs counter to the principle of democracy where every voice should be heard. Furthermore, the exclusion of learners in school governance opposes the principle of the decentralization of education, which Zambia tried to promote through the National Decentralization Policy of 2002 and is indeed in opposition to the concept of decentralization and school governance which the study leans towards.

When writing about factors affecting participation in school governance, Mncube (2009) indicates that, the factors that inhibit SGBs from acting democratically include language barriers, level of education of parents, lack of training, and fear of “academic victimization” of their children. Similar barriers to effective operations of SGBs were observed in South Sudan. For example, Kamba (2010) contends that the roles performed by SGBs were underperformed in South Sudan mainly as a result of a lack of training in managerial skills for board members. Lack of training of school governors has also been observed by participants in other sections of this study.

Although democratic ideals were noted in both sampled schools, evidence from the fieldwork revealed that some undemocratic elements were found in sampled schools. These sentiments expressed by school governors during interviews are in line with what Young (2000) refers to as “internal exclusion”. This occurs when individuals that are normally included in the group are excluded in certain instances. In this case, learners were excluded by lack of interaction privileges in both sampled school governing boards. Although Young (2000) refers to language as a barrier to interaction, this was not the case with the sampled schools in Zambia. Other forms of internal exclusion, which are peculiar to this study were the learners being told to leave meetings when discussing issues involving members of staff, unfair payment of sitting allowances and minimal participation by learners in the deliberations of governing board meeting. In addition, members of the SGBs were also excluded from electing the chairpersons of SGBs. In this case, the parents, teachers and learners were excluded, while the management team actively participated in appointing the chairperson of the school governing board.

The above presentation has highlighted factors that hinder school governing boards from acting democratically. Acting undemocratically is contrary to the principles of liberal democracy, which guide the operations of school governing boards. The concept of liberal democracy, which underpins the operations of secondary schools, rests on the core values of rational and moral autonomy, community engagement, consensus, equality, fairness and liberty (MoE, 1996; Mncube, 2008; Nswana and Simuyaba, 2021). Failure on the part of school governing boards to uphold these principles undermines the principles of democracy and brings the democratic function in disrepute as noted by Makwaya (2005). The evidence from South Africa (Mncube, 2009) and Zambia (Bowasi, 2007; Makwaya, 2005; Mwanza, 2010) is that training is essential if governing boards are to achieve the objectives set for them. Naidoo *et al.* (2015) emphasize that schools need to consistently empower stakeholders with knowledge in order for them to understand that involvement impacts positively on educational achievement. Therefore, SGBs need to be supported on how they can effectively engage and participate fully on school governing boards. The lack of democratic practices found in the sampled schools therefore supports the need for the training of school governors if they have to function effectively. Hence, efforts should

be focused on ensuring that SGBs are aware of different ways they can involve themselves in meetings.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, it is evident that in the sampled schools, enabling factors for democratic school governance existed. The school governing boards were thus democratic in many aspects and had somewhat implemented the principle of decentralization where all stakeholders at the grassroots participated in the school decision-making processes.

Despite the general perspective that enabling factors existed in the democratic governance of schools, this study also revealed that in certain cases the school governing boards harbored factors that disenabled the implementation of democratic values. For example, the Central government at Ministry of Education Headquarters still hold the strings regarding schools' governance. Furthermore, the parent did not take part in the election of the board chairpersons as this was perceived to be the preserve of the SMT. Findings show that the autocratic appointment of the chairpersons of the school governing boards had engendered tension among adult governors. Finally, failure to conduct democratic elections for the chairperson position on the school governing board was perceived to be a disenabling factor for democratic school governance in the sampled schools.

This study in agreement with recent studies in other contexts indicate that lack of training renders school governing board members unable to engage fruitfully in meetings. Lack of the democratic practice of empowering the governing board members with the knowledge and skills required of them to engage actively in debates, therefore, seems to suggest that certain undemocratic values were embedded in the practices of school governing boards in the sampled schools in Zambia. This is the case, because the research evidence has clearly demonstrated that training empowers school governors to engage fruitfully in the debates during school governing board meetings (Heystek, 2004; Kamba, 2010; Harber and Mncube, 2012). This thus clearly demonstrates that the SGBs were not adequately prepared to perform their duties on the school governing boards in Zambia.

In view of the preceding findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed: (1) Clear policy guidelines on governance for school governing boards should be formulated. Unless policy on governance in school governing boards is drafted to guide school governing board members in accordance with findings of this study, there will be little chance of realizing democratic governance among school governing boards in Zambia, (2) There should be a serious commitment to nurturing school governing board members' innate capabilities to enable them to deliberate effectively in meetings. This can be done through induction programs. Without serious commitment, democratic school governance has little chance of being realized in the school governing boards of Zambian secondary schools, (3) "Association of Retired Education Administrators" should be formed. This could be used to conduct capacity building programs for school governing board members. The governance skills and knowledge of such administrators would go a long way in nurturing school governing board members' innate capabilities to enable them to deliberate effectively in meetings, (4) The Ministry of Education (MoE) need to redefine the roles of SGBs. If SGBs are to allow for the authentic participation of all school governors in school governance, this will require addressing power structures and contentious issues raised by school governors. This in turn will lead to democratic school governance, (5) SGBs should conduct open and fair elections for chairpersons. This has to be done in line with what is provided for in the national guidelines for the implementation of governing boards in Zambia.

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